

Richard Schacht Profile (2023)

Richard Schacht (Harvard '63) is Emeritus Professor of Philosophy and Jubilee Professor of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois (Urbana-Champaign), where he taught for 40 years (18 of them as Chair of its Philosophy Department). Born in Racine, Wisconsin, in 1941, and raised in Madison, he now resides in Santa Fe, New Mexico. His philosophical interests revolve around the general topic of human reality, and related issues in social, normative and value theory.

Schacht has written extensively on Nietzsche and other figures and developments in European philosophy after Kant. His books include *Hegel and After*; *Alienation*; *The Future of Alienation*; *Nietzsche*; *Making Sense of Nietzsche*; and, most recently, *Nietzsche's Kind of Philosophy*. His edited books include three relating to Nietzsche and *The Norton Anthology of Western Philosophy After Kant: The Interpretive Tradition*.

Philosophical Biography

Schacht began his studies in philosophy as an undergraduate at Harvard, from which he graduated in 1963, with an honors thesis on "The Feeling of Guilt." (John Rawls was one of his examiners.) They continued at Princeton, from which he received his doctorate in 1967, with a dissertation on "The Concept of Alienation." Prior to going to Illinois that fall, he spent a year at Tübingen University acquainting himself first-hand with his specialty, German philosophy, returning there during his first sabbatical.

His introduction to philosophy was through its history, and was the beginning of his enduring interest in the history of philosophy. He taught the "Early Modern" course at Illinois for a time; and that resulted in one of his early books, *Classical Modern Philosophers: Descartes to Kant* (1975). For most of his Harvard and Princeton philosophy professors, that history ended with Kant, and contemporary philosophy began with the advent of analytic philosophy a century later.

However, he was introduced to post-Kantian European philosophy, by two of its most prominent (and very few) exponents in America at the time: Paul Tillich, at Harvard, and Walter Kaufmann, at Princeton. Existentialism had attracted his interest early on; but he learned from them that there was much more to European philosophy after Kant than that and the beginnings of analytic philosophy.

With Hegel, a new and different tradition had begun. Commonly referred to as “Continental philosophy,” Tillich referred to it as the “interpretive” tradition; and Schacht was drawn strongly to it. As he soon learned, it was then little known but intensely disparaged in mainstream analytic circles. It was to deepen and expand his knowledge and understanding of that tradition in particular that he went to Tübingen.

Hegel was disdained in existentialist circles; but Tillich had high regard for Hegel, Kaufmann did as well, and Schacht came to share it. In the 1960s the concept of “alienation” – a key concept for both Hegel and Marx – loomed as large in popular-intellectual circles as the idea of authenticity. Kaufmann persuaded Schacht to make that the topic of his dissertation, which became his first book, *Alienation* (1970).

Alienation theory remained a major interest of his in the years that followed, and is an important concept in his thinking relating to the social dimension of human reality. The result was a second book on that topic: *The Future of Alienation* (1994). And his interest in Hegel broadened and deepened, as his appreciation of other aspects of Hegel’s thought grew. That is reflected in the title of Schacht’s *Hegel and After* (1975), and in Hegel’s prominence in his *Norton Anthology*. Hegel is surpassed as an influence in his thinking about human reality only by Nietzsche, even though he is no Hegelian.

Thinkers and developments in the “interpretive tradition” in post-Kantian European philosophy have been Schacht’s primary focus in his teaching and much of his writing. Hegel, Nietzsche, post-Hegelian naturalism, existential philosophy, and its rival “philosophical anthropology” have been the developments of particular interest to him. But his own thinking, and his manner of dealing with these figures and developments, reflect his long exposure to and appreciation of aspects of the analytic tradition.

Concerns and Aims

Schacht’s appreciation of both traditions, and his conviction that they are deserving of parity in the history of Western philosophy after Kant, have long been evident in his work. They culminated in his General Editorship of the *Norton Anthology of Western Philosophy After Kant* (2017) in two equally formidable 2000-page volumes: *The Interpretive Tradition* and *The Analytic Tradition*.

Schacht's fundamental aspiration throughout his career, beyond his own particular philosophical interests, has been to overcome the schism and mutual hostility within the philosophical community of adherents of these two traditions, that prevailed during much of the last century and still endures. Their antagonism made philosophical life all too difficult for those of his generation who didn't want to have to choose between them. It has lessened; but it concerns him that versions of it live on.

One of his challenges in the first decades of his career – that of “legitimizing” – was to convince philosophers in the Anglo-American analytic mainstream that at least some of what thinkers like Hegel, Nietzsche and Heidegger were doing should not be denied the name of philosophy, and has philosophical worth. This has involved trying to show that and how it is possible to articulate aspects of it in an analytically comprehensible way.

This has remained among Schacht's aims and efforts. But it has led to another kind of challenge: that (as he sees it) of “rescuing.” That for him means resisting the appropriation and recasting of aspects of the thought of such figures in the interpretive tradition that turn them into something quite different than they significantly were, and to assimilate them to the philosophical fashions and interests of the day. His career-spanning work on Nietzsche is a case in point.

Schacht and Nietzsche

Schacht began by taking on the “legitimizing” challenge (culminating in his 1983 *Nietzsche*, published in Routledge's “Arguments of the Philosophers” series). Its comprehensive treatment of Nietzsche's philosophical thinking made it clear that he was and remains a philosopher deserving of being taken seriously in the contexts of not only the history of classical modern philosophy but also both its interpretive and analytical traditions after Kant.

He subsequently has twice risen to challenges of the “rescuing” sort. The first instance (culminating in his 1985 *Making Sense of Nietzsche*), was the challenge posed by the treatment of Nietzsche in the post-structuralist deconstructionist manner that came to be known as the “French” Nietzsche, making him out to be a kind of radically nihilistic anti-philosopher.

The second instance was the more recent (and virtually opposite) “analytic” reading of Nietzsche taking him to subscribe to a scientific sort of philosophical “naturalism.” Schacht's response to it is given most fully in

his *Nietzsche's Kind of Philosophy*. For him both of these terms – “analytic” thinker and “naturalizing” reinterpreter – do apply to Nietzsche, but only if they are more broadly understood than they tend to be, and are meant to be. In that respect he considers both terms, as applied to Nietzsche without this qualification, to be seriously misleading.

Schacht's case in response to both of these instances of what he takes to be problematic assimilation – from which he has taken Nietzsche to have needed rescuing – is that they are fundamentally at odds with the general character of what he says and does in his texts, and of his larger philosophical enterprise.

Philosophical Interests

Schacht's own philosophical interests are centered (as he takes Nietzsche's to have been) in human reality and value theory. His thinking with respect to both is broadly naturalistic – along the lines of his understanding of Nietzsche's kind of emergentist or transformational naturalism, enriched by Hegelian resources – and supplemented by existential-philosophical perspectives.

He is a philosophical Nietzschean in the sense in which others are considered to be Kantians and Hegelians – not to the letter, but in spirit. His kind of philosophy is a version of what he considers *Nietzsche's kind* of philosophy fundamentally and generally to be. He is a *kind* of philosophical naturalist; and his *kind* of naturalism is a version of what he considers Nietzsche's to have been. And the same may be said of his thinking with respect to human reality, knowing, normativity, morality, and value.

But Schacht's versions of them are often also enriched by his versions of the thinking and kinds of philosophy of certain others as well: Hegel's, Marx's, and Heidegger's in particular, and also of the “philosophical anthropologists” Helmut Plessner and Arnold Gehlen.

They further reflect his indebtedness to both the interpretive and the analytical traditions, for the different but complementary philosophical sensibilities they have engendered. His kind of philosophy is a version of Nietzsche's in which both sensibilities are in play, and in which an analytic sensibility is even more evident than it is in Nietzsche's own. Schacht's kind of philosophy, like Nietzsche's, is fundamentally an interpretive endeavor, centering upon and revolving around the reinterpretation of

human reality, and either is or is not a kind of “analytic” philosophy, depending on what is meant by that.

His conception and understanding of human reality (and therefore his kind of naturalism) is an elaborated and enriched version of Nietzsche’s own. It is not identical with the latter; but even in its differences, it remains emphatically *Nietzschean*, in most of what it both precludes and includes.

It incorporates human possibility as well as variety, and emphasizes its historicity and its social, cultural, linguistic, intellectual, artistic, and other such human “transformations of the natural.” And it too insists upon the necessity of reinterpreting and rethinking all human phenomena accordingly, subjective as well as objective, from the cognitive to the normative.

Related Interests

They have another kinship of interests as well, that is both philosophical and personal: music and music making. For both, music is not only a passive enjoyment, but also involves active engagement. (In Nietzsche’s case, by way of the piano and composition; in Schacht’s, the French horn and voice.) And for both, *opera* matters – Wagner’s in particular. One of Nietzsche’s most engaging books is his *The Case of Wagner*. And one of Schacht’s (written with Philip Kitcher) is *Finding an Ending: Reflections on Wagner’s Ring* (2004).